

The University of Liverpool – written evidence (DAD0022)

1. Here, we submit evidence primarily in answer to the question 8 posed in the call for evidence; 'To what extent does social media negatively shape public debate, either through encouraging polarisation or through abuse deterring individuals from engaging in public life?'
2. We submit this evidence as individuals but conduct our work as part of our roles as academics working for University of Liverpool. We are academics at the University of Liverpool who specialise in online political communication and gender.
3. As part of a project we conducted, we produced two outputs that assessed almost 120, 000 tweets sent to UK Members of Parliament over a two-week period in 2018. We then conducted two separate analyses on these tweets. The first focussed qualitatively on the abuse and othering that 'intersectional' MPs received. This is where MPs possess two or more marginalised characteristics, for example being a black woman or a gay woman. The second was a mixed methods study whereby we conducted a large-scale quantitative analysis of the differences in incivility received by male and female MPs on Twitter. We then supplemented this with qualitative work assessing the different types of gendered incivility being sent to MPs on Twitter.
4. For our qualitative study (Southern and Harmer, 2019a) we found that abuse against MPs of intersectional identity broadly fell into four key themes. These were 1) outright misogynistic and racist abuse; 2) silencing and dismissal; the questioning of the MP's intelligence or position as a representative and 4) 'benevolent' othering of an MP with a disability.
5. The first three categories of abuse contribute to a sense that representatives who do not fit the image of a traditional MP (that is, essentially a white, able-bodied man) are not welcome in politics. The final category, while not meant negatively by the people who posted the messages to the MP in question still contributes to the sense that disabled MPs are 'different' than those without disabilities, which still reinforces the political sphere as one for individuals without disabilities.
6. For the broader study (Southern and Harmer, 2019b), all of the 120, 000 tweets were analysed against nine separate categories of incivility. These were 1) general incivility 2) stereotyping 3) name calling 4) calling the recipient a liar 5) calling them unintelligent and 6) profanity aimed at the MP 7) silencing 8) questioning their position as an MP (for example imploring them to resign or otherwise leave the political sphere) and 9)

outright threats of violence. We also separated any tweets with what could be considered 'gendered' incivility in order to analyse them qualitatively.

7. In the quantitative analysis, we found that although male MPs were more likely to receive tweets containing incivility, female MPs were more likely to receive tweets which stereotyped them, questioned their position as an MP and outright threats of violence. These are arguably the 'worst' types of incivility to receive as they contribute to discrimination (stereotyping), feed into the pervasive atmosphere that women are not welcome in politics (questioning their position) and a feeling that politics may be less safe for women (threats of violence). This air of being reminded that they are representatives of their identity / gender rather than themselves as an individual (and are therefore held to different standards than male MPs), being told more often that they should leave politics altogether, and a receiving higher levels of threats of violence shows that political Twitter is pervaded by 'ambient sexism'.
8. In the qualitative analysis the abusive tweets fell into four categories. These were 1) outright gendered or misogynistic abuse 2) demonization of female MPs 3) sexual objectification of female MPs and 4) feminization of male MPs. The first three categories are fairly self-explanatory in terms of meaning, but the final category is interesting in that, although the abuse is aimed at male MPs, the effect of the abuse is still to reinforce online political spaces as male, due to the fact that the posters insulted them by likening them to women.
9. However, there are some positives here too. Around 10% of all Tweets sent to MPs were uncivil. This suggests that while it is certainly not an insignificant problem, it is not the online tsunami of abuse that is often portrayed in the mainstream media. Over a third of MPs in our sample received no uncivil tweets for the whole of the sampling period. A large proportion of the tweets sent to members were respectful, supportive and even reverential on occasion.
10. There were also fewer differences than might be expected in the way MPs were treated online in terms of gender. This is not to underplay the misogynistic abuse that was found and then differences that were at play. However, there is some suggestion that online abuse may be putting younger women off entering politics and if that is the case it is also important to outline that these fears may be exaggerated somewhat, or may be experienced disproportionately by more high profile politicians.

References

Southern, R., & Harmer, E. (2019). *Othering Political Women: Online Misogyny, Racism and Ableism Towards Women in Public Life*. In K. Lumsden, & E. Harmer (Eds.), *Online Othering Exploring Digital Violence and Discrimination on the Web* (pp. 187-210). Springer. doi:10.1007/978-3-030-12633-9_8

Southern, R., & Harmer, E. (2019). *Twitter, Incivility and "Everyday" Gendered Othering: An Analysis of Tweets Sent to UK Members of Parliament*. *SOCIAL SCIENCE COMPUTER REVIEW*. doi:10.1177/0894439319865519

Rosalynd Southern is a Lecturer in Political Communication at the University of Liverpool. Her research focuses on online political communication during election campaigns. She has analysed online campaigning by UK parties at the last three UK general elections and during the EU referendum. In addition to this, she has conducted work on female politicians and their use of, and treatment via, various media.

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